

# Studying YOUR OWN School

SECOND EDITION

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An Educator's Guide to  
Practitioner Action Research

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Merging Educational Practice and Research

### *A New Paradigm*

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

##### The Multiple Traditions of Action Research

Education tends to be an ahistorical field. We value the new and trendy and often fail to realize that the new is sometimes the old dressed up in new language. Action research has a long and varied tradition. It is important that both practitioners and academics understand that there is a diverse intellectual tradition of action research and that it is distinct from the academic research tradition in education.

Our purpose in describing the various action research traditions is to illustrate that action research is not new and is not monolithic. There are differing viewpoints among these traditions about why and how action research should be undertaken.

The notion of traditions is also important because what counts as valid research is what sociologists call a "social construction"

(Berger & Luckmann, 1967). At different times in different social contexts, what constitutes valid ways of creating knowledge will vary. It is not by accident, for example, that emancipatory, grassroots approaches to research emerged from the oppressive social conditions of the third world. It is also not surprising that positivist, quantitative methods emerged as dominant in the field of education in the United States during the early and mid-20th century and have reemerged in the current climate of the 21st century.

In this section we provide a condensed account of a variety of action research traditions. There is only space to whet the reader's appetite to explore further the work summarized here. We hope that practitioners, armed with knowledge of previous attempts to promote research by practitioners, will be in a better position to articulate the importance and legitimacy of their own work.

### Beginnings of Action Research

The idea of educational practitioners doing research in schools goes back at least as far as the late 19th and early 20th century with the movement for the scientific study of education. Teachers were viewed as the front line of data gatherers for a massive research movement that saw teachers as researchers, working scientifically in their classroom laboratories (McKernan, 1988).

Although this vision of teachers as researchers never materialized, it is interesting to note that within this model, teachers were allocated the role of carrying out research in their classrooms that was designed by university researchers. This vision of teachers as researchers viewed teachers as mere gatherers of data that could be analyzed statistically.

As early as 1926, Buckingham (as cited in McKernan, 1988) recognized the potential of qualitative, case study research: "Among the many types of research work available to teachers, the making of case studies is by no means unimportant" (p. 176). The hierarchical relations between universities and schools reflected in most of this early work on action research continues to be a source of tension today.

Overlapping this scientific movement in education was the progressive movement inspired by John Dewey. In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey argues that all inquiry involves both common

sense and science. In a more direct reference to action research, Dewey (as cited in McKernan, 1988) states:

Educational practices provide the data, the subject matter which form the problems of enquiry. . . . A constant flow of less formal reports on special school affairs and results is needed. . . . It seems to me that the contributions that might come from classroom teachers are a comparatively neglected field; or, to change the metaphor, an almost unworked mine. (p. 177)

Dewey's work is the inspiration of much of the current writing on the "reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1983), which has helped us better understand how school practitioners make sense of their experiences and engage in professional learning. (For a more complete discussion of action research and the Progressive era, see Schubert & Lopez-Shubert, 1997.)

### The Action Research Tradition

Some see the origins of action research in the work of Kurt Lewin and the group dynamics movement of the 1940s. Although Lewin was not the first to use or advocate action research, he was the first to develop a theory of action research that made it somewhat respectable in the social sciences. Lewin believed that knowledge should be created from problem solving in real-life situations. Among the problems he studied were those related to production in factories and discrimination against minority groups (Lewin, 1946, 1948). Argyris and Schön (1991) briefly describe the goals and methods of the action research tradition:

Action research takes its cues—its questions, puzzles, and problems—from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts. It bounds episodes of research according to the boundaries of the local context. It builds descriptions and theories within the practice context itself, and tests them there through intervention experiments—that is, through experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desired change in the situation. (p. 86)

The double burden that Argyris and Schön refer to is the concern with both action (improvement of practice, social change, and the like) and research (creating valid knowledge about practice). According to them, this sets up a conflict between the rigor and the relevance of the research—a conflict that has been viewed as both an advantage and a disadvantage by different commentators. Unlike traditional social science research that frowns on intervening in any way in the research setting, action research demands some form of intervention. For the action researcher, this intervention results in a spiral of action cycles in which one undertakes

1. To develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening
2. To act to implement the plan
3. To observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs
4. To reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning and subsequent action through a succession of cycles (Kemmis, 1982, p. 7)

This cycle of activities forms an action research spiral in which each cycle increases the researcher's knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem and leads to its solution. In action research these are often referred to as plan-act-observe-reflect cycles, and all four moments of the cycle can occur during a single lesson or over a period of weeks or months. All competent practitioners engage informally in these cycles of reflective action, but action research makes such reflection more intentional and systematic.

### Action Research in Education

During the early 1950s, action research was promoted in the field of education principally by Corey (1949, 1953, 1954) at Columbia Teachers College. Corey believed that teachers would likely find the results of their own research more useful than the results of the work of outsiders and thus would be more likely to question current curricular practices. Corey was the executive

officer of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, which was founded at Teachers College. Under Corey's direction, members of the Institute's staff collaborated on research with classroom teachers. In his 1953 book, Corey published several of these studies and a summary of what he called the "cooperative action research movement." Foshay (1993), a participant in the movement (Foshay & Mann, 1953), describes the rather sudden demise of action research in education:

The chief limitation of cooperative action research, from the point of view of the educational researchers of the time, was that it was not possible to generalize from the examined population to others, because no attempt was made to see whether the examined population was representative of a larger population. In addition, since much of the research was designed and carried out by classroom teachers, who were not trained in research, the data often were flawed. For these reasons the movement was ridiculed in the publications of AERA, and it did not spread. It disappeared as the members of the Institute staff scattered with the passage of time. (p. 3)

It is not surprising, given the general hostility that educational researchers in the 1950s felt toward nonpositivist research of any kind, that action research was ridiculed and judged by positivist standards. By the end of the 1950s, action research had declined not only in the field of education but in the social sciences as well. In an article titled "Whatever Happened to Action Research?" Sanford (1970) suggested that funding agencies wanted more basic research and that an increasing split between science and practice led to the cult of the expert (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979) and the top-down, "social engineering" mentality of the period. In spite of its current popularity among teachers, action research is again under attack by a resurgence of positivism, social engineering, and "evidence-based" "teacher-proof" curricula.

Although action research never totally disappeared, interest in it waned during the 1960s—a decade in which adherence to the cult of social engineering reached its height. The late British researcher Lawrence Stenhouse is usually credited with renewing interest in action research in Britain during the 1970s.

### The Teacher-as-Researcher Movement in Great Britain

Although there had been much discussion throughout the 20th century of the idea of school practitioners doing research within their own sites, generally there had been more talk than action. With a teacher research movement that began in Great Britain during the late 1960s, this began to change. This movement is most often associated with the work of Stenhouse, who established the Center for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at East Anglia University, and with the later work of John Elliott and Clem Adelman of the Ford Teaching Project.

Elliott (1991) makes the case that teacher research began as a teacher-led curriculum reform movement that grew out of concern by teachers over the forced implementation of behavioral objectives in curriculum and Great Britain's tracked educational system. He describes his own participation in the teachers-as-researchers movement in Great Britain during the 1960s:

Curriculum practices were not derived (by us) from curriculum theories generated and tested independently of that practice. They constituted means by which we generated and tested our own and each other's theories. Practices took on the status of hypotheses to be tested. So we collected empirical data about their effects, and used it as evidence in which to ground our theorizing with each other in the context of collegial accountability. We didn't call it research, let alone action research. This articulation came much later as the world of academia responded to change in schools. But the concept of teaching as reflexive practice and a form of educational inquiry was tacitly and intuitively grasped in our experience of the innovation process. Our research was by no means systematic. It occurred as a response to particular questions and issues as they arose. (p. 8)

The heyday of action research in Great Britain saw a teacher research movement develop in the schools as well as a series of large, state-funded collaborative action research projects. During the 1970s and 1980s, a lively debate took place in Great Britain over a number of issues in action research. Among them were

a search for a guiding paradigm (Altrichter & Posch, 1989), the political problems of promoting action research within institutions that do not want to look at themselves too closely (Holly, 1989), and the usefulness of more quantitative approaches to action research (Harwood, 1991). One of the most interesting critiques was that of feminist action researchers.

Feminist researchers involved in the Girls and Occupational Choice Project (Chisholm, 1990; Weiner, 1989) and Girls in Science and Technology (Whyte, 1987) argued that action research was being turned into a project in social engineering and was losing its "emancipatory" potential. German feminist action researcher Mies (as cited in Chisholm, 1990) argued that the radical potential of action research is lost when it is turned into a recipe and controlled by state agencies:

[Early on] "action" was interpreted not as socially liberating and dynamic praxis, but rather, in a manner observable in many activist groupings where precise short-term goals are set, as a narrow pragmatism. The same would appear to be true for what is termed "action research," which typically comprises planned intervention in specific social contexts, mostly under the control and direction of state agencies and monitored by researchers—in other words, a sort of social engineering. (p. 255)

This concern with moving action research beyond narrow pragmatism and planned interventions by external agencies had been taken up earlier by a group of Australians led by Stephen Kemmis, who spent time with British action researchers at East Anglia (Tripp, 1990). Carr and Kemmis (1986) challenged older models of action research as essentially conservative and positivist. In a later article, Carr (1989) reasserts that, "in theory, action research is only intelligible as an attempt to revive those forms of democratic dialogue and reflective theorizing which under the impact of positivism have been rendered marginal" (p. 89). He is concerned that as action research becomes more methodologically sophisticated and technically proficient, it will lose its critical edge.

Two booklets that had an important impact on teacher research in the 1980s were Kemmis and McTaggart's *The Action*

*Research Planner* (1982), a user-friendly introduction to the action research spiral, and Kemmis's *The Action Research Reader* (1982), a compilation of critical action research studies.

### Participatory Research: The Legacy of Paulo Freire

Long before feminists and critical theorists began their critique of the conservatism of traditional action research, a model of action research was taking hold in Latin America. After the Brazilian military coup of 1964, Paulo Freire, literacy worker and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), was forced into exile in Chile. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Freire and a group of Chilean literacy educators began a series of "thematic research" projects. Freire's (1970) notion of thematic research was a highly inductive process in which research was viewed as a form of social action. In this type of research, "generative themes," or issues of vital importance to community members, are identified, used as a basis for literacy instruction, and studied in a collaborative fashion. Such projects have a dual purpose: to help participants (usually adults) acquire literacy and to help them engage in social critique and social action. In other words, literacy involves learning to read the word and the world. This type of action research is called participatory research or participatory action research (PAR).

In 1976 the Participatory Research Group was created by the International Council of Adult Education in Toronto and its network centers around the world. During the last three decades, "participatory research" has been done all over Latin America and the rest of the developing world (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Pals Borda, 2001; Gaventa, 1988; Hall, 2002) and increasingly in the United States (Kelly, Mock, & Tandon, 2001). The first World Symposium of Action Research was held in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1977. This conference has since been held throughout the world and attracts thousands of attendees (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). A North American example of a similar approach is the work in Appalachia of the Highlander Center, led by Miles Horton and more recently by John Gaventa (Gaventa & Horton, 1981).

Although methodological considerations depend on the context within which the study is undertaken, de Schutter and Yopo

(1981) describe the following as general characteristics of participatory research:

- The point of departure for participatory research is a vision of social events as contextualized by macro-level social forces.
- Social processes and structures are understood within a historical context.
- Theory and practice are integrated.
- The subject-object relationship is transformed into a subject-subject relationship through dialogue.
- Research and action (including education itself) become a single process.
- The community and researcher together produce critical knowledge aimed at social transformation.
- The results of research are immediately applied to a concrete situation. (p. 68)

In Freirian-inspired participatory research, the academic research model is challenged at almost every point. The dualisms of theory and practice, subject and object, and research and teaching are collapsed. This perspective also challenges many of the premises of more traditional models of action research. Many of the criticisms are similar to the feminist critique of action research discussed above. Brown and Tandon (1983) indicate that traditional action research tends to concentrate on an individual or group level of analysis of problems, whereas participatory research, with its more emancipatory emphasis, tends to focus on a broader societal analysis. Traditional action research tends to emphasize issues of efficiency and improvement of practices, whereas participatory research is concerned with equity/self-reliance/oppression problems.

Participatory research also operates out of a more politically sophisticated perspective and is viewed as taking place within a field of power relations in which conflicts of interest often create resistance to the research. Participatory researchers assume that they will be resisted from above (i.e., by powerful vested interests), whereas traditional action researchers are often consultants who are hired by the powerful. Herr's account of her action research in Chapter 4 is an example of action research that evolved into a

participatory action research project as students took ownership of the research questions.

### Action Science

Action science is largely associated with the work of Argyris (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), who has been influenced by the action research tradition discussed above. More recently, he has incorporated aspects of critical theory into his work, particularly Habermas's (1979) theory of communication, which seeks to establish nondistorted communication in which the force of the better argument prevails, as judged in free and open discussion.

Argyris wishes to return the scientific dimension to action research, arguing that the problem-solving focus of action research has moved it too far away from the tasks of theory building and testing. The goal of an action science, according to Argyris (Argyris et al., 1985), is the generation of "knowledge that is useful, valid, descriptive of the world, and informative of how we might change it" (p. x). He has criticized some types of action research for adhering to traditional social science notions of "rigorous research," arguing that "to attain a certain level of rigor, the methodology may become so disconnected from the reality it is designed to understand that it is no longer useful" (p. x).

Drawing on the work of Dewey and Lewin, and often writing with Schön (Argyris & Schön, 1974), Argyris over the years has evolved an intervention strategy for changing the status quo that stresses organizational learning. According to Argyris et al. (1985),

[I]n social life, the status quo exists because the norms and rules learned through socialization have been internalized and are continually reinforced. Human beings learn which skills work within the status quo and which do not work. The more the skills work, the more they influence individuals' sense of competence. Individuals draw on such skills and justify their use by identifying the values embedded in them and adhering to these values. The interdependence among norms, rules, skills, and values creates a pattern called the status quo that becomes so omnipresent as to be taken for granted and to go unchallenged. Precisely because these patterns are taken for granted, precisely because these skills are automatic,

precisely because values are internalized, the status quo and individuals' personal responsibility for maintaining it cannot be studied without confronting it. (p. xi)

Argyris's work is important for action researchers because it points out why many institutions may not be thrilled at the idea of close examination. It is also important because unless solutions to the classroom and school problems under study tap into the complex theories of action that underlie and maintain the status quo, problems will only be solved in a superficial and temporary manner.

Robinson (1993), a former student of Argyris, describes the need for problem-based methodology in educational research:

Much research has failed to influence educational problems because it has separated problematic practices from the pre-theorized problem-solving processes that gave rise to them and which render them sensible to those who engage in them. Once practice is understood in this way, the theorizing and reasoning of practitioners becomes a key to understanding what sustains problematic practice. Problem-based methodology provides a way of uncovering, evaluating and, if necessary, reconstructing these theories of action. (p. 256)

What Robinson's work implies is that action research should not simply promote practitioners' "practical theories" (Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986) in a nonproblematic way but should explore in self-reflective ways how some practical theories may be perpetuating the very problems practitioners identify for study.

### The Teacher Researcher Movement in North America

Although the teacher researcher movement in North America occurred later than in Britain and Latin America, it was not derivative of either movement nor was it a reappropriation of the North American action research movement of the 1940s and 1950s. CARE and the work of Freire inspired many North American academics and some teachers, but the movement among North American teachers to do research began with a unique set of circumstances:



1. The dominance of the quantitative, positivist paradigm of research in education was challenged by qualitative, case study, narrative, and ethnographic research from the late 1960s on. Because qualitative forms of research more closely resemble the narrative forms already used by practitioners to communicate their knowledge, making these forms of research legitimate helped open the door for practitioners to experiment with more systematic qualitative approaches in studying their practice.

2. Research on successful school change efforts and schools as contexts for teachers' professional work began to report that school-based problem-solving approaches to change were more likely to be implemented successfully than large, federally funded, outside-in initiatives (Fullan, 1982; Lieberman & Miller, 1984). These findings spawned a large number of "collaborative" or "interactive" research and development efforts, in which educational practitioners were invited to work alongside R&D experts in implementing programs and improving practices. (For accounts of these collaborative research projects, see Griffin, Lieberman, & Jacullo-Noto, 1982; Oakes, Hare, & Sirotnik, 1986; Oja & Ham, 1984.)

3. The increased deskilling of teachers and the dissemination of teacher-proof curricula spawned an effort on the part of educational practitioners to reprofessionalize teaching and to reclaim teachers' knowledge about practice as valid. *The Reflective Practitioner*, by Donald Schön (1983), encourages practitioners to tap into their store of professional knowledge to make it explicit and share it with other practitioners. From the notion of "reflective practice," it was only a short step to that of action research, which became linked to an overall attempt by educational practitioners to reassert their professionalism. The report of the Boston Women's Teachers' Group titled *The Effect of Teaching on Teachers* (Freedman, Jackson, & Boles, 1986) described the structural conditions and isolation of teachers' work that makes professionalism difficult (see also Freedman, Jackson, & Boles, 1983). This report pointed out that teachers work "in an institution which supposedly prepares its clients for adulthood, but which views those entrusted with this task as incapable of mature judgment" (Freedman et al., 1986, p. 263). Liston and Zeichner (1991), in reviewing the group's work, point out that the research was used

to "combat the individualistic bias in the school reform movement of the 1980s, which served to direct teachers' sense of frustration with and anger about their work away from a critical analysis of schools as institutions to a preoccupation with their own individual failures" (p. 150).

These problems have increased in the wake of the omnibus No Child Left Behind educational reform legislation, signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, which gives these deskilling tendencies the force of law (McNeil, 2000). The social engineering tendencies in this legislation and its obsession with testing and narrow forms of accountability have decreased professional autonomy for teachers and administrators. Under the influence of such regimes, action research is captured almost exclusively by the technical knowledge interests described later in this chapter.

4. Encouraged by the pioneering work of Atwell (1982), Goswami and Stillman (1987), Graves (1981), Myers (1985), the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (2003), and the Bay Area Writing Project, language arts teachers led the way in doing teacher research and writing about it from an "insider" perspective. They have not only used student writing as data but also written case studies of a variety of issues in the teaching of writing. Because of these teachers' own commitment to writing, they have tended to lead the way in writing and publishing accounts of their experiences as teacher researchers. (For examples, see Ballenger, 1993, 1998; Brookline Teacher Research Seminar, 2003; Gallas, 1993, 1997, 2003; Goswami & Schultz, 1993; Martin, 2001. See also our summary of Ballenger's [1993] research in Chapter 3.) The increasing importance of Vygotskian sociocultural approaches to literacy have also encouraged greater collaboration among researchers and practitioners (Lee, Smagorinsky, Pea, Brown, & Heath, 1999).

5. Many university teacher education programs and university/school collaborations began to emphasize teacher research. One of the best known efforts to incorporate teacher research into a teacher education program is that of Ken Zeichner and others at the University of Wisconsin (Caro-Bruce, Klehr, & Zeichner, 2007; Liston & Zeichner, 1991). Susan Noffke, Jennifer Gore, and Marie Brennan, all former university supervisors in the elementary teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, have



documented the uses of action research in the preparation of teachers (Noffke & Brennan, 1991; Zeichner & Noffke, 2002). More recently, Mary Klehr, Ryan Flessner, Ann Schulte, and Julio Perera have continued this work, and the Madison School District supports action research as a form of professional development and generation of knowledge.

A school district-initiated action research collaboration is led by Jackie Delong in Ontario, Canada. As superintendent of the Grand Erie School District, she helped found a partnership with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, the Grand Erie District School Board, and Nipissing University. This has resulted in the use of action research for teacher training and development and a journal, *The Ontario Action Researcher*, through which they disseminate findings.

Programs of this kind are becoming more common in colleges of education and school districts and promise to have an important impact on moving teacher and administrative preparation programs toward a more reflective model. For accounts of other similar programs and discussions of the role of action research in teacher education and school-university collaborations, see Christman et al. (1995), Clift, Yeal, Holland, Johnson, and McCarthy (1995), Gitlin et al. (1992), Johnson (2002), Moller (1998), Sirotnik (1988), and Smith-Maddox (1999).

6. The school restructuring movement of the 1980s began to propose restructuring schools to create conditions that nurture teacher inquiry and reflection. The Holmes Group's (1990) *Tomorrow's Schools* contains a chapter dedicated to schools as "centers for reflection and inquiry." This chapter covers themes first reported in Schaefer's 1967 book, *The School as a Center of Inquiry*. The notion of schools as communities of learners has grown over the past two decades (Rogoff, Turkkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). Many independent collaborative efforts to restructure schools have included action research as an aspect of teacher empowerment. In Georgia, the League of Professional Schools has made action research a key component in the move to shared governance and school renewal (Glickman, 1993). The Coalition of Essential Schools is founded on the notion of ongoing inquiry and reflection and attempts to build these habits of mind in students. These types of reform movements have promise to make action research more legitimate.

### Action Research as Self-Study and Autoethnography

While action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in solving a problem, there is also an important place in action research for deep reflection that leads to individual professional growth. In fact, some writers on action research have criticized its tendency to privilege the group over the individual (Webb, 1996). Whitehead (as cited in Webb, 1996), for example, promotes action research as a self-reflective process focused on the individual.

I believe that the incorporation of "I" as a living contradiction in explanations for the educational development of individuals has distinguished an original contribution to the Action Research movement. . . . I experience problems or concerns when some of my values are denied in my practice; I imagine ways of improving my practice and choose a course of action; I act and gather evidence which will enable me to make a judgment on the effectiveness of my actions; I evaluate the outcomes of my actions; I modify my concerns, ideas and action in the light of my evaluation. (p. 159)

(See also McNiff & Whitehead, 2000.)

This focus on the individual practitioner follows the lead of Schön (1983) in attempting to understand how practitioners learn their craft. A focus on one's own personal and professional selves is a form of action research usually called self-study (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001) or autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Bullough and Pinegar (2001) discuss quality criteria for self-study research, focusing primarily on research done by teacher educators in universities. However, viewing practitioner action research as self-study may be useful in providing a needed balance between the demands of "data gathering" and "self-reflection." They caution that self-study

does not focus on the self per se but on the space between self and the practice engaged in. There is always a tension between those two elements, self and the arena of practice, between self in relation to practice and the others who share

the practice setting. Each self-study researcher must negotiate that balance, but it must be a balance—tipping too far toward the self side produces solipsism or a confessional, and tipping too far the other way turns self-study into traditional research. (p. 15)

Practitioner action researchers are seldom studying a problem in their classroom or school divorced from their own personal and professional beliefs and actions. The gaze of the teachers studying their own classrooms or principals studying their own schools must be directed both outward and inward.

### Practitioner Action Research: From Academic Tradition to Social Movement

Older traditions of action research were generally associated with academics, mostly social scientists who were virtually all men, such as Dewey, Lewin, Corey, Stenhouse, Elliott, Argyris, Schön, Freire, and Kemmis. As school practitioners become more active in sharing their work and action research becomes a broad-based movement, it has the potential to reject the dualistic hierarchies of university and school, knowledge and action, theory and practice. It has the potential to become a truly grassroots, democratic movement of knowledge production and educational and social change. Winter (1987) elaborates on how action research challenges current conceptions of social inquiry:

Action research addresses "head on" social inquiry's fundamental problems—the relation between theory and practice, between the general and the particular, between common sense and academic expertise, between mundane action and critical reflection, and hence—ultimately between ideology and understanding. (p. viii)

However, few commentators on action research go into detail about what "critical" reflection looks like or how it is accomplished. Too often, it is assumed that a paradigm shift to action research will automatically provide a critique of the status quo grounded in practitioners' realities. Kincheloe (1991) presents an alternative possibility:

When the critical dimension of teacher research is negated, the teacher-as-researcher movement can become quite a trivial enterprise. Uncritical educational action research seeks direct applications of information gleaned to specific situations—a cookbook style of technical thinking is encouraged. . . . Such thinking does not allow for complex reconceptualizations of knowledge and as a result fails to understand the ambiguities and the ideological structures of the classroom. [In this way] teacher research is co-opted. Its democratic edge is blunted. It becomes a popular grassroots movement that can be supported by the power hierarchy—it does not threaten, nor is it threatened. Asking trivial questions, the movement presents no radical challenge or offers no transformative vision of educational purpose, as it acts in ignorance of deep structures of schooling. (p. 83)

In a similar vein, Miller (1990) recounts how she and a group of teachers in a research study group struggled with this very issue of expanding the focus of action research so as to become "challengers" of nonresponsive educational institutions. One teacher researcher in the group asks the following question:

Do you think that we could just turn into another form, an acceptable professional form of empowerment? Well, what I mean is that nothing would please some administrators I know more than to think that we were doing "research" in their terms. That's what scares me about the phrase "teacher-as-researcher" these days—too packaged. People buy back into the very system that shuts them down. That immediately eliminates the critical perspectives that we're working on. I'm afraid. But I'm still convinced that if enough people do this, we could get to a point of seeing at least a bigger clearing for us. (p. 114)

As Schön (1983) points out, social institutions are characterized by dynamic conservatism. This conservatism is dynamic in that it constantly pulls practitioners back to a status quo that, as noted by Argyris et al. (1985), consists of norms, rules, skills, and values that become so omnipresent as to be taken for granted and to go unchallenged. Either practitioner action research can reproduce those norms, rules, skills, and values, or it can challenge them. However, practitioners intuitively know that when they

challenge the norms, the institution's dynamic conservatism will respond in a defensive, self-protective manner.

A survey conducted in 1999 of institutions affiliated with AACTE (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education) indicated that almost half required teacher education candidates to participate in action research (Henderson, Hunt, & Wester, 1999, as cited in Green & Brown, 2006). But as Green and Brown (2006) point out, there does not seem to be a clear-cut concept or unified set of procedures that is agreed upon for these experiences. While it is increasingly popular to include some form of action research in teacher preparation, these efforts do not necessarily link teacher research with larger issues of equity in educational systems.

If the practitioner action research movement is to break out of the dynamic conservatism of schools and school systems, then these institutional issues must be addressed by action researchers. As Miller (1990) indicates, this may be best done in the context of action research study groups.

A teacher in Miller's (1990) group wonders whether, as teachers find their voices through critical forms of action research, their schools will welcome their voices or view them as troublemakers:

What's bothering me still is what's beneath the apparent. What's bothering me is not really the idea of no copy machine for teachers to use, or mice in the school, or the lack of supplies. I've finally realized that teaching is a political thing. Its politics remain under the table. I know that I have deliberately and consciously avoided this for many years. I can honestly say that I was aware of it but chose to remain removed, naive, and ill-informed. When I started in 1977, I told myself that I'd never be involved. So I taught each and every class with exactly what I was given, did exactly what I was told. I never questioned class size, supply procedures, curriculum requirements or extracurricular demands. I volunteered for everything from spring concert, to participating in Gym night, to working in three schools with no time for a scheduled lunch period. But, now I'm no longer willing to do all of that, or at least I now ask "why?" I know that I'm different now than I used to be as a teacher. I know I'm thinking differently, I know that I'm involved, because teaching is involvement! I know

my involvement, my becoming vocal, has been noticed. And I don't think they like it! But I can no longer be the teacher who just teaches what others have thought up and given name to. I'm running things now. What about me as an *educator*? Can there be such a thing, can I exist? (p. 140)

Practitioners must make their peace with how much of a challenge of the status quo they wish to be. Some are more skillful and more accounts of those who do decide to challenge the status quo through their action research and the complexities they encounter in these efforts (Herr, 1999b). However, if action research is not done with a critical spirit, it runs the risk of legitimating what may be—from the perspective of equity considerations—unacceptable social arrangements.

## ACTION RESEARCH: EPISTEMOLOGY

### Quality Criteria for Practitioner Action Research

Terms like *validity* and *trustworthiness* are used to describe quality criteria for quantitative and qualitative academic research. *Validity* is a term favored by quantitative researchers, and *trustworthiness* is favored by qualitative researchers. The choice of language for quality criteria for action research is important, because to use either term risks being evaluated by inappropriate criteria. Some have suggested the term *workability* as a term more appropriate to action research. However, we find this notion of "what works" to be too utilitarian. Eventually, action researchers will develop a language system more appropriate to the particular dilemmas involved in action research, but for the purposes of this book, we use *validity* and *trustworthiness*, with the caveat that neither is a particularly good fit.

In a general sense, *internal validity* or *trustworthiness* refers to the trustworthiness of inferences drawn from data. Quantitative researchers tend to use statistical analyses to make these inferences, whereas qualitative researchers tend to use qualitative data. *External validity* refers to how well these inferences generalize to a larger population or are transferable to other contexts.